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Doyel: The ruination of college basketball starts in high school

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(Photo: Gary Moore)

This is a different kind of dirt staining college basketball.

It's scarier than the initial FBI bombshell from September, scummier, and suggests that what's happening underneath the NCAA's nose is unstoppable.

The malfeasance reported by Yahoo on Friday is far worse, far bleaker than what we've known since [news broke in September of indictments of coaches at four big-time college basketball programs](https://www.indystar.com/story/sports/columnists/gregg-doyel/2017/09/26/doyel-fbi-college-basketball-cheating-scandal/704661001/). (<https://www.indystar.com/story/sports/columnists/gregg-doyel/2017/09/26/doyel-fbi-college-basketball-cheating-scandal/704661001/>)

This [report \(https://sports.yahoo.com/exclusive-federal-documents-detail-sweeping-potential-ncaa-violations-involving-high-profile-players-schools-103338484.html\)](https://sports.yahoo.com/exclusive-federal-documents-detail-sweeping-potential-ncaa-violations-involving-high-profile-players-schools-103338484.html)Friday? This is why college basketball will never be clean ... unless.

Unless *what?* I'll get there, and some of you won't like it, but it's the only way.

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But first, let's acknowledge that what the FBI has found is terrifying: The dirtiest part of college basketball has nothing do with the schools or coaches. There are some bright and shiny words in the latest report — Duke! Kentucky! Kansas! North Carolina! Michigan State! — and I'm not here to vouch for everyone on that list. More on that in a minute, too.

What I'm here to tell you is more hopeless, even, than that: In some cases, the ruination of college basketball has nothing to do with college. It's happening in high schools, where dirty agents and leeches of their ilk are targeting future NBA players — and unlike in football, it's far easier to identify a future pro in basketball — and tempting them with money.

Really easy to sit there, reading this story from a nice office or living room — or are you reading it on a \$1,200 iPhone X? — and tut-tut that a high school kid would dare to break rules imposed by the NCAA, an organization the kid hasn't even joined. Really easy to sit here from our middle-class perch and say a 17-year-old kid should just know better.

Ever been poor? Ever had money dangled in front of you, not because you can do something as nasty as selling drugs or rob banks, but because you can do something as wholesome as dunk a basketball? Unless you can answer both questions in the affirmative, go easy on the outrage directed at some of the names on the Yahoo report, names such as NBA rookies Bam Adebayo (out of Kentucky), Dennis Smith Jr. (North Carolina State) and Kyle Kuzma (Utah), and names of players still playing in college such as Miles Bridges (Michigan State), Wendell Carter (Duke) and Collin Sexton (Alabama).

Direct your outrage instead at the agents. A document published Friday by Yahoo lists cash advances to players on a balance sheet from former NBA agent Andy Miller's ASM Sports agency. Agents are the ones truly ruining college basketball. Players are eating the forbidden fruit, yes, but scummy agents are the snake.

The college coaches in bed with sneaker companies — [a marriage consecrated by NCAA presidents themselves](https://www.indystar.com/story/sports/columnists/gregg-doyel/2017/09/28/ncaa-presidents-blame-college-basketball-scandal-fbi-rick-pitino-louisville/711098001/) (https://www.indystar.com/story/sports/columnists/gregg-doyel/2017/09/28/ncaa-presidents-blame-college-basketball-scandal-fbi-rick-pitino-louisville/711098001/) — aren't helping, but there's a solution there: The FBI. Defrauding a university of hundreds of thousands of dollars by facilitating payments that make a player ineligible? That's a federal offense. About time the FBI got involved. What took you so long, G?

Threaten jail time, as the FBI is now doing, and just watch how fast (most) coaches stop cheating. See, it's not all *that* easy to land a job on a college coaching staff. An athletic director has to interview you. A compliance department has to clear you. There are barriers in place, barriers that have failed miserably for years, but barriers nonetheless that, combined with the threat of prison time, have a chance to clean up that part of the game. Not just anyone can be a college basketball coach.

But almost anyone can be an agent.

Literally, almost anyone. Like being a one-person law firm: No job interview, no oversight, just hang a shingle and print up the business cards. Hell, at least a lawyer has to graduate law school and pass the bar. To become an NBA agent, according to the National Basketball Players Association's own website, you need to have a four-year degree and to pass a background check. And the four-year degree thing? Eh, that's not a hard-and-fast rule. [See for yourself.](https://nbpa.com/becoming-an-agent/) (https://nbpa.com/becoming-an-agent/)

Because this is a fallen world, there will always be a layer of opportunistic sleaze that sees young, unsophisticated players as a ticket to the top.

Like cockroaches: The FBI can splat all the gross little insects it wants; more will always be hiding behind the wall.

The solution? It's simple, but first you really need to understand that each school identified Friday as having a potentially ineligible player isn't necessarily guilty, even if every single player in that report did in fact break NCAA rules. The cheating alleged here is mostly between the agent and player. Sometimes, a coach doesn't know. That does happen. My children, and yours, have done things that we as parents would never allow. What things? No

idea. We never found out. And nobody knows our children better than we do.

You follow? A college player can take money from an agent — whether years ago in high school, or last week in a parking lot somewhere — and his coach not know. Now, some coaches do know or at the very least should know. A kid on his team starts wearing better clothes or using a better phone or driving a car? Red flags. Some coaches will see a red flag and look the other way. Some won't. Which is which? We don't know. We all think we know, especially self-congratulatory sports writers like myself who have covered this dirty sport for a long time.

But I don't know who's dirty. Those schools listed above, the ones with exclamation marks next to their names? I'm dying to tell you which head coach(es) in that group I'd vouch for, but to do that would unfairly throw shade at the handful of coaches at those schools — and it's more than one — that I wouldn't. And just because I wouldn't vouch for a coach, it doesn't mean he's dirty. It means I don't know.

How to fix this? First, it'll never be fixed. Not completely. Cheaters and grifters will always find a way. But the best shot we have is for the FBI to get even more involved, and I know, I know, the FBI has better things to do. Point taken. But just as the FBI investigation already has led to indictments of college coaches that will scare straight a good number of present and potential future cheaters, the FBI could have the same impact by coming at this from the other end: the players.

To do that would require a level of government intrusion that would make some uncomfortable. This is not me telling you: The FBI needs to poke around the perimeter of the top high school basketball recruits every year. This is me telling you: That's the only way.

Eliminating the one-and-done rule would stop only those players who turn pro out of high school from defrauding a college of its scholarship. It wouldn't stop agents from sinking their hooks into them at age 16. And every year there are scores of future pros coming out of high school, players who clearly have NBA potential but just as clearly need two or three years of college first.

Agents want those guys, too.

For years the NCAA has identified the top incoming freshmen in basketball and football and given them special attention in the eligibility certification process — to their transcripts, to their confidantes — they couldn't possibly give every recruit. The NCAA knows which recruits are most likely to bring the cheaters and grifters out of the walls. It's just powerless to stomp most of those cockroaches.

The FBI isn't powerless.

Let the FBI start looking into the top 25 or 50 recruits who sign a federally backed college scholarship, and let them revisit those players every year they spend on a federally supported college campus, and the game changes. Would the FBI do that? Should the FBI? Not my call, and again: The FBI has more important things to worry about.

But we get the behavior we accept. And in college sports, we've accepted so much.

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